

Identity

When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me. Was I, then, a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned?

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Much of our self-identity – the things we believe about ourselves and the stories we tell about ourselves – are influenced by our gender and what we perceive is expected of us as a result. Gender also influences the way we define others, the way we relate to them and the sorts of behaviours we expect of them. Writing, which can act as both mirror and window, can expand the way we see various gender roles and the way we think about ourselves and others.

The titles in this section address questions of identity and gender in a variety of ways. In *The Night Guest*, Ruth is losing her identity as her memory fades – or is it being stolen from her by an uninvited guest? In *Sea Hearts*, sea-witch Misskaella shapes women from the hearts of seals, manipulating one to create the other. In *Night Games*, truth is stretched and twisted until it is no longer recognisable, even to the people telling it. And in *Like a House on Fire*, Cate Kennedy presents a collection of stories spanning identities shaped by death, love, loss and change.

Alongside the notes relevant to each title, it may help to consider the following questions and resources, more broadly related to gender and identity.

QUESTIONS

- ◆ What roles do women take on in the book (e.g. mother, wife, carer, witch, victim or protector) and how are those roles influenced by gender?
- ◆ How are the attitudes towards each of the characters influenced by their gender?
- ◆ Are the characters treated differently by men and by women and, if so, how?

- ◆ How does their gender influence the way each character thinks about themselves and their abilities?
 - Does it limit them in any way?
 - Does it give them freedoms?
 - Does it place certain expectations on them?
- ◆ How does each character's understanding of their own identity differ from other people's understanding of them?
- ◆ How do the characters change their identities over the course of the book?
- ◆ How do you feel that gender roles shape your identity?
- ◆ How does a negative understanding of a gender role influence your willingness to identify with it?

ACTIVITIES

Write a list of titles you might use to define yourself (e.g. daughter, student, athlete etc.). Which of these are influenced by your gender? Write a short journal entry detailing the ways you feel limited by these titles, and another detailing the ways you feel empowered.

Consider the books on this list and think about fiction as a window into someone else's life. Write about how one of the characters makes you understand identity better through reading their story. Try taking on their role and, in pairs, having a conversation as your chosen character.

RESOURCES

Gender-role development

<http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/education/DLiT/2002/family/gender.htm>

Gender roles and gender differences

http://highered.mheducation.com/sites/0072820144/student_view0/chapter15/index.html

Gender-role identity and self-esteem

<http://www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/garp/articles/eccles96e.pdf>

Always #LikeAGirl (VIDEO)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjJQBjWYDTs>

Rebalancing gender roles by leaving men to hold the baby

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/society-and-culture/rebalancing-gender-roles-by-leaving-men-to-hold-the-baby-20110706-1h2dr.html>

Notes on *Like a House on Fire*

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2013 STELLA PRIZE



... a house on fire is a perfect description for what seems to be happening now: these flickering small resentments licking their way up into the wall cavities; this faint, acrid smell of smoke. And suddenly, before you know it, everything threatening to go roaring out of control.

Cate Kennedy, *Like a House on Fire*

SYNOPSIS

This collection of short stories catalogues moments from the dramatic to the mundane. In each story, though, there is an expansion of the characters beyond the roles that they have fallen into, an understanding of their own humanity which allows them to view the humanity in others. The collection inspires compassion and considers the impact of time and expectation on our relationships.

Flexion – A woman witnesses what she believes will be the death of her husband as he is crushed under their tractor. He survives, a harsh man who is unable to show gratitude towards the kindness of others, unable to ask for help, unable to show weakness or to tolerate perceived weakness. His wife takes an almost cruel satisfaction in becoming the dominant one in the relationship, until a moment of genuine warmth and shared understanding happens.

Ashes – As Chris drives his mother to a childhood fishing spot so that they can scatter his father's ashes, he dwells on the years of perceived injustices doled out to him by his parents. Hurting also from a recent breakup, Chris considers his mother a burden and is counting the days until he can escape her expectations. As they reach the lake, he starts to feel the weight, too, of his father, of not being accepted, of not being enough. As he feels the grainy sand of his father's ashes between his fingers, Chris sees beyond his mother's fussiness to her genuine grief. In this crack of humanity, Chris revisits his own role in his relationship with his father, wishing that he had been able to compromise years earlier.

Laminex and Mirrors – An eighteen-year-old girl takes on a hospital job over the summer holidays to save up so that she can travel to London. Although she begins the job just to earn money, she manages to collect a series of snapshots of the lives of those around her, images that put her life into perspective and give her insight into life, death, love and compassion.

Like a House on Fire – In the story that lends its name to the book, a husband looks at his life from his prostrate position on the floor. He has hurt his back and, as a result of pain and the threat of further injury, must lie still as life continues around him. Once active and competent, he now feels frustrated with his inability to move and to contribute to his family, helplessly watching as his sons become more immersed in television and lose the playfulness that he remembers from only a year earlier. As his perspective changes so, too, do the attitudes of his family.

Five-Dollar Family – A new mother waits in hospital for her milk to come in. Only days after giving birth, this mother cradles her newborn baby and lets her torn and tender body be pummelled and judged by hospital staff. Her boyfriend, a loser named Des, doesn't know what to do with himself, and she has already decided that she's leaving him behind. Determined to get one happy keepsake photo, though, she pushes through the pain, dresses her newborn and makes the three of them go to the mall for a family photo.

Cross-Country – Rebecca wallows in the dregs of her failed relationship. As she sleeps all day and surfs the internet for signs of her ex, she becomes obsessed with the idea of him as a runner. She talks about getting running shoes, joining a club and has images of herself overtaking him. This image in fact motivates her to get up again and return to work. However, she has missed something crucial in his online profile.

Sleepers – Ray is thinking about his broken relationship as he passes a new development in town that has resulted in a number of redgum sleepers being piled along the edge of the road for resale. Hyped up by gossip, despair and a dream that is yet to take shape, Ray drives out to the pile one night to load up his truck with what he believes he deserves.

Whirlpool – Anna is a young girl on the brink of adolescence who is enduring another obligatory Christmas photo. She feels judged by her mother and escapes the stuffy, false air of the house, filled with conspiratorial looks and minor betrayals, into the cool, blue freedom of their above-ground pool.

Cake – Liz, a new mother, returns to work burdened with the guilt of leaving her eighteen-month-old son at childcare. She struggles with leaving the mothering side of herself behind, which she is expected to do while at work. At home, she finds it difficult to explain her feelings to her husband as she tries to eke out precious moments with her baby boy.

White Spirit – A woman working in a block of community housing has commissioned two artists to paint a mural depicting the community within. However, as the project goes on, she starts to feel ashamed, questioning the validity of the project and its relevance to the actual community.

Little Plastic Shipwreck – Roley arrives at work one day at Oceanworld to discover that Samson the dolphin has died. As Roley becomes increasingly frustrated with the manager's cold-hearted treatment of the park's star animal, he starts to notice the dinginess of the park. In a day that climaxes when he quits and storms out through the gift shop, Roley takes home a little plastic snow globe to his wife, the once-witty woman whose brain injury means that she no longer knows to shake the souvenir for snow.

Waiting – A woman waits anxiously at a clinic for the results of her latest ultrasound. She is there following a long line of miscarriages and lost children. She hasn't even told her husband that she is pregnant, worrying for his feelings. Alone in the waiting room, she considers the procedure that has now become routine.

Static – In a story that takes place during a family's Christmas Day celebrations, Anthony tries to negotiate between his wife's and his parents' demands on him, and the image of how he'd envisaged his life would be by this point. The story is filled with characters left wanting, and so it has a sense of longing, for children, for money and for happiness.

Seventy-Two Derwents – In the story that concludes the collection, Tyler writes a journal for her teacher Mrs Carlyle. She is in Year 6 and lives at home with her mother and sister Ellie, although she has brothers and a sister who live with other families. Through the journal we learn of Shane, Tyler's mum's boyfriend, and how when he is around she feels stones grinding together in her stomach. As the drama of her family unfolds around her, Tyler clings tight to a sliver of hope that comes in the form of a tin of Derwent pencils.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND



CATE KENNEDY is the author of the highly acclaimed novel *The World Beneath*, which won the People's Choice Award in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards in 2010. She is an award-winning short-story writer whose work has been published widely. Her first collection, *Dark Roots*, was shortlisted for the Steele Rudd Award in the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and for the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. She is also the author of a travel memoir, *Sing, and Don't Cry*, and the poetry collections *Joyflight*, *Signs of Other Fires* and *The Taste of River Water*, which won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Poetry in 2011. She lives on a secluded bend of the Broken River in north-east Victoria.

www.thestellaprize.com.au/2013/04/the-stella-interview-cate-kennedy/

THEMES

Identity
 Humanity
 Love
 Death
 Understanding
 Birth
 Parent-child dynamics

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

This collection asks a lot of readers – it asks them to be **critical** and **literate** and to consider the **ethical** treatment of others within the scope of our shared humanity. Its indelible images of Australia and the landscape also offer the opportunity to consider and discuss themes such as **sustainability**.

Given the nature of short stories, and the number of platforms where short-story writers can submit their work and read the work of others, there is a real opportunity within the study of this text to promote **ICT** capabilities. Within this unit, students will have the opportunity, as the general capabilities suggest, to read, view and respond to ‘digital and multimodal texts’.

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ How is the title of each piece relevant to the story?
- ◆ How do you feel the book title is relevant to the collection?
- ◆ What similarities can you find between each of the stories?
- ◆ What impact do you get from short stories that you don’t get from novels? What are the positive and negative aspects of them for you as a reader?
- ◆ How do each of the stories make you feel?
- ◆ Compassion is a key theme in the book. How does Cate Kennedy or her characters show compassion in each of the stories? How does this translate to feeling compassion as a reader?
- ◆ Before you start the book, write down what you think the title means.

Flexion

- ◆ How is Frank different before and after the accident?
- ◆ How does his wife’s attitude towards him change?
- ◆ Why do both of these characters change their attitudes towards each other?

Ashes

- ◆ How does Chris see his mother, and how does this make him act towards her?
- ◆ What moment changes his attitude to his father, and to his mother?
- ◆ What happens at the end to signify that something has changed between Chris and his mother?

Laminex and Mirrors

- ◆ Why does Matron hunt out Marie? Why is Matron annoyed? Why is Marie annoyed?
- ◆ What misconceptions does the main character have about Len and Dot? What changes her mind about them? What part does she have to play in this moment?
- ◆ Why is Mr Moreton both happy and sad about his daughter’s visit? Why do you think the main character decides to do what she does for him?

Like a House on Fire

- ◆ What does the title of this story refer to? (Does it fit with your suggestions for the book’s overall title from earlier?)
- ◆ What hints does the author give to suggest that the dynamic between the two adults was once different?
- ◆ How have Ben and Sam changed between this Christmas and the last? Why does this make their father sad?
- ◆ How do each of the characters compromise in the story?

Five-Dollar Family

- ◆ In what ways is Des a disappointment?
- ◆ How does the main character describe her own body at various points throughout the story?

- ◆ Why is she so determined to get this family photo?

Cross-Country

- ◆ How does Rebecca describe the differences between the grief over a loved one dying and the grief over a relationship ending?
- ◆ Why does she become so obsessed with the image of overtaking her ex while running?
- ◆ What two words unravel her thoughts?

Sleepers

- ◆ 'Just Ray' is echoed several times in this story. Who says/thinks it, and what tone does it set for Ray's character?
- ◆ Why does everyone believe that they have a right to take a share of the sleepers?
- ◆ Consider the final few sentences of the story and Ray as a character. What are the similarities between the two?

Whirlpool

- ◆ What strikes you immediately about the narrative point of view of this piece?
- ◆ What hints are there in the story about Anna's position within the family? How do they all feel about her? How does this make her feel about herself?
- ◆ What does the pool represent to the girls and their father?

Cake

- ◆ The presence of cake is repeated throughout the story and is echoed in the title. What do you think the significance of this is? How does it make Liz feel, and why?
- ◆ What roles is Liz trying to switch between? How is she finding it difficult? How do others make things more difficult?

White Spirit

- ◆ What is the importance of the mural? How does the main character feel let down by it?
- ◆ What is 'the growing sense of community ownership through collaboration'?

- ◆ What is happening differently in the reality of this community project than was intended by the theory of it?

Little Plastic Shipwreck

- ◆ How does Roley feel about Oceanworld and his job? Why doesn't he quit?
- ◆ How does the author show us the differences between Roley and Declan? How do we know Roley's opinion of Declan?

Waiting

- ◆ Before we know where the main character is or what she is there for, how does the author develop the tone of the story?
- ◆ How does she show the tension and anxiety in each of the characters? What are they worried about?
- ◆ What are the different kinds of love demonstrated in this story?

Static

- ◆ What are the 'Evil Rays'? Where are they coming from?
- ◆ What are the differences between Marie and her husband and his parents?
- ◆ What is each of the characters longing for?

Seventy-Two Derwents

- ◆ How does the author show you that the girl in this story is younger than the narrators of other stories in the book?
- ◆ Is the family rich or poor? How do you know? How do each of the characters act because of this?
- ◆ What do you know about the relationship between Ellie and her mother from Tyler's story? How does Ellie take care of Tyler?
- ◆ Why does Mrs Carlyle call the police? How does this impact Tyler?
- ◆ What are the benefits of having a young narrator? And what are the drawbacks?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. In class, discuss the short-story form. On the board or a poster write a list of features that you as a class think are important in a successful short story. Using one of the themes above as inspiration, write your own short story. It should be no more than 2000 words, and should consider the elements you have come up with in class.

2. Different publications publish quite different stories. Look into some journals (print or online) that accept short-story submissions. Read at least three stories from at least two separate editions of the journal. What elements do you feel your chosen journal looks for in a story?

Look up the submissions process for your chosen journal. This should give you information about how submissions are accepted, preferred styles, length etc. Based on this information and the stories that you have read, write a story that you feel would be suitable to be submitted to your chosen journal.

Read your story to a partner and ask for their feedback.

When you have edited your piece, submit it to the journal you have chosen.

(Publications to look at could include *Overland*, *Voiceworks*, *Kill Your Darlings* and the *Killings* blog, *Meanjin*, *Seizure*, *Sleepers Almanac* and *Southerly*, as well as university newspapers and journals.)

3. In this¹ interview, Cate Kennedy talks a lot about where she finds inspiration for her imagery and ideas. As imagery is often central to a short story, try to find a collection of pieces that you could use as an inspiration board or journal. Collect at least ten pieces. They could be quotes, images, descriptions of people or places you've been, photos, newspaper articles, any number of things. Stick these in a journal (or turn this into an online project by using a Tumblr or a blog) and write a short piece explaining the images that each item creates for you. Try to write a short creative piece based on one of these images.

¹ <http://www.abiggerbrighterworld.com/what-lights-cate-kennedys-imaginative-fire/>

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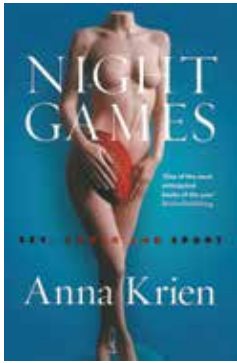
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Notes on *Night Games*

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2014 STELLA PRIZE



Where does this sense of entitlement start? I remember something a footballer told me when he briefly tried out as a rookie in an AFL team ... when he wore his new uniform home, he stopped to grab a burger and chips. To his unease, the shopkeeper wouldn't let him pay. It was nothing really, he told me, six bucks or something, but still it played on his mind. It was as if the old boundaries and rules were disappearing.

Anna Krien, *Night Games*

CONTENT ADVICE

Night Games is a work of nonfiction and its investigation of footy culture, the media and attitudes towards women is well worth studying. However, given the subject matter, there are scenes in the book that some schools may decide are inappropriate for students. If this is the case, these notes can still be used to study themes relevant to students alongside portions of the text selected by the school.

SYNOPSIS

In this riveting work of nonfiction, Anna Krien takes readers on a fascinating and often disturbing journey into the darkest corners of Australian football culture.

Night Games follows a young footballer who, only shortly after moving to Melbourne and joining the Coburg Tigers, becomes the accused in a rape trial. What begins as an accusation of a pack rape, involving high-profile players from the Collingwood Football Club, soon sees Justin (whose name has been changed for privacy reasons) left hanging. He is dropped by his famous friends, their well-known lawyers and his club, left wondering how things had gone so horribly wrong.

Despite not being able to speak directly with the complainant in the rape case, Krien presents a multi-faceted view of the night itself. In the first part of the book, Krien introduces the trial and the people involved, and sheds some light on the legal process itself. She examines the language used to describe the events, and details the initial legal process – which involved three accused, represented by a high-profile lawyer engaged by the Collingwood Football Club – and the discussions between lawyers and the judge as the two Collingwood players are separated from

the action and therefore the case itself. She watches and questions the ethics of separating one part of the incident in question from the next, and of feeding the jury only some of the available information.

From there, Krien casts a wider net, looking at the definition of rape, along with the grey areas of consent and the resulting legal ramifications. She examines the attitudes towards women within football culture that lead to the too-frequent occurrence of these incidents. No stone is left unturned as she investigates attitudes towards players' girlfriends, wives and one-night stands as well as to women involved in the culture in other ways – as media reporters and as club board members. She notes those who are trying to change the culture from within, and that some small steps forward have undoubtedly been made. This is by no means an anti-male book, or even an anti-football book. Krien points out that many of these objectionable attitudes are shared by women too, and that those who report rape are often criticised by their female counterparts as much as by males.

The media is scrutinised, including the demeaning and obnoxious treatment of women and use of female

effigies by high-profile media personalities such as Sam Newman on *The Footy Show*. In addition, the issue of trial by media is raised, particularly when, partway through the trial, a *Herald Sun* article publishes misinformation about Justin with the potential to taint the jury and negatively impact the entire trial. Underlying this media circus is the personal drama, the way the trial and its implications affect not only Justin but also his family, who are dealing with a relative's terminal illness during the trial.

The reader knows the trial's conclusion from the outset. However, many of the questions that it raises are left open, put out not necessarily to provide a set of answers but to start a vital discussion around the ethics and attitudes within Australian elite sports and the associated media.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND



ANNA KRIEN is the author of *Night Games: Sex, Power and Sport*, *Into the Woods: The Battle for Tasmania's Forests* and *Quarterly Essay 45, Us and Them: On the Importance of Animals*.

Anna's work has been published in *The Monthly*, *The Age*, *The Big Issue*, *The Best Australian Essays*, *The Best Australian Stories*, *Griffith Review*, *Voiceworks*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Colors*, *Frankie* and *Dazed & Confused*.

www.thestellaprizel.com.au/2014/04/the-stella-interview-anna-krien/

THEMES

Identity
Rape
Footy culture
Media bias
Legal procedures
Women in sport
Truth
Sex and consent
Fame
Power

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Night Games is a challenging and confronting book to read, and one that not all schools will decide is suitable for students. For those who do decide to study the book, or select sections thereof, there is a great deal for discussion. In the context of **ethical understanding**, the book encourages readers to analyse group behaviour and its relation to individuals' attitudes and personal responsibility. Within the **personal and social capability**, students are asked to 'empathise with and appreciate the perspectives of others', and to do this via 'analysis, research and the expression of viewpoints and arguments'. A text such as *Night Games*, which presents multiple perspectives and encompasses a whole range of issues – around the culture of football, media representation, rape and the treatment of women – will challenge and develop these skills and assist students to articulate their thoughts on complex and/or controversial topics.

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ What do the words 'power' and 'disempower' mean to you?
- ◆ Which issues within the book do you think fall within 'grey areas'?
- ◆ What is meant by entitlement? What attitudes does it encourage?
- ◆ Who else (aside from the players themselves) participates in the creation of 'jock culture'?
- ◆ Is this sense of mateship in sports a bad thing?
- ◆ How does the author present the court case?
- ◆ Do you feel that the book is biased because the author is unable to present the complainant's evidence? How does she attempt to get around this issue? Does she succeed in doing so?
- ◆ How is Justin presented as a character?
- ◆ How much of the author do you sense in the book? (Think about moments where she inserts her opinion or where language implies her attitude towards something.) Is it a bad thing that

this book is told by an ‘I’ rather than an invisible narrator?

- ◆ Who holds the power in this situation? Is it Justin? Sarah? Is it one individual or a group?
- ◆ What different types of media are shown in the book? How is each of these portrayed?
- ◆ What roles do you see women taking throughout the book? What are their attitudes? (Consider their attitudes to men, to themselves and to each other.)
- ◆ What are your thoughts on parts of the night being withheld from the trial? Is it fair?
- ◆ Discuss the difference between ‘fair’ and ‘legal’. How does withholding these scenes impact the people involved in the trial?
- ◆ How is Justin treated by his friends and family?
- ◆ Where can you see attitudes changing or efforts being made to change attitudes throughout the book? What attitudes are they? Who is perpetuating them? What are the responses to change?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Language is an important element of the book. Find examples in the text where language is used in each of the following ways. Discuss its importance, how it can be manipulated, and what it tells us about both the speaker and who is being spoken about.

- ◆ Definition
- ◆ Derogatory
- ◆ Lies
- ◆ Misunderstanding
- ◆ Jokes
- ◆ Stereotyping
- ◆ Demeaning
- ◆ Intimidating
- ◆ Legal

2. What is meant by ‘trial by media’? How is a trial by media similar to gossip? Discuss the ways that gossip can affect an individual.

In gossip, and in trial by media, where does the truth fit? Does it matter?

Write a short journal, blog or vlog about a time when you have been the victim of gossip, or when you have participated in gossip about someone else.

(The film *Gossip* [2000] would be a good tie-in for this activity.)

3. One of the big issues in the book is media bias. Readers are encouraged to question what they are told by mainstream media, particularly in cases where popular sentiment can easily overwhelm the truth. Look through newspapers and online news sites for several articles written by different people about the same issue. See if you can find any firsthand information about the issue. Try to write your own interpretation of events based on this. Write a passage critically examining the way the information is being presented to you. Consider the following when doing this.

- ◆ What is the issue?
- ◆ Who is involved?
- ◆ Who is reporting on it?
- ◆ Who are they reporting for?
- ◆ Does the individual/organisation have any connection to the issue outside of journalism?
- ◆ Is there any public pressure towards a particular opinion?

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Notes on *Sea Hearts*

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2013 STELLA PRIZE



If time, tide and circumstance were right, I could persuade them to combine, at the centre of the seal-being, into a man-like or a woman-like form.

Margo Lanagan, *Sea Hearts*

SYNOPSIS

Misskaella Prout is a knotted old witch who terrifies the young children of Rollrock. In the opening scene of the book, Daniel, Grinny and James are collecting sea hearts for their mothers when they stumble past Misskaella on the beach and, terrified, they rush away as quickly as possible.

But, in fact, Misskaella began her life as a small, frightened child. It is her grandmother, as she lies on her deathbed, who first labels Misskaella ‘different’. Misskaella is much younger and less attractive than her sisters, who tease her about her strange eyes and dumpy body, so at first her ‘difference’ is attributed to age and appearance. Soon, though, Misskaella realises that her differences run much deeper: she has a power no one else in her family possesses.

She has always felt an affinity for the seals that come to rest their velvety, lazy bodies on the beach, but her powerful differences only really become apparent to Misskaella when one day the world becomes distorted, pushed and pulled by a wind visible only to her. When she visits the seals on the beach, she sees that the myths of Rollrock are true, that she would be able to conjure a human from beneath the skin of a seal. Frightened by the seals’ reaction to her, Misskaella flees, spending days hiding in her bed as seals fill the streets in an attempt to follow her. As much as she tries to hide her newfound powers, the town and her family see her otherness. Some older members of the town even send gifts to placate her lest she use her powers against them. Some also send advice, which Misskaella is able to use to gain control over her new abilities. Her family and peers,

however, are nothing but scornful, and she suffers terribly from their attacks and derision.

Still, Misskaella doesn’t break. She has found a place where she feels that she belongs, and one night, when the desperation of being alone is at its peak, she conjures a handsome and gentle man from the skin of a bull seal. They spend the night together, before she returns him to his skin and watches him swim away. Weeks later, as she cares for her invalid father in the house that her sisters have long left, Misskaella discovers that she is pregnant. She gives birth alone, and hides her baby boy for fear of the town’s judgement. Despite loving him with all her heart, and despite feeding him more than she is physically able, the child does not grow. A blanket of seaweed soaked in the sea offers some comfort, but it is brief, and Misskaella realises that she must give up her son to his seal form.

Alone now, grieving, and taunted still, Misskaella turns sour. She brings forth a seal woman, who walks up onto the shore, at once winning the hearts of the men. Although the seal woman finds her skin and escapes, the damage is done. The town’s men have lost their hearts and are willing to pay Misskaella anything to create each of them a sea maiden.

What follows is a series of narratives by other characters – Bet Winch, Dominic Mallett and Daniel Mallett – as gradually the men on Rollrock leave their wives for sea maidens. Dominic Mallett, taken away from Rollrock as a child by his mother, returns the week before his own wedding on the mainland

to settle his parents' affairs. Once there, he too falls under the spell of Misskaella's sea maidens, and takes a sea wife, returning to live again in his childhood home.

The bulk of the remainder of the narrative is told by Dominic's son, Daniel. Daniel, like all the other boys on Rollrock, has a 'mam' from the sea. There are no girl children, as they are sent back to the sea to be raised as brides for future generations. Daniel is not interested in finding a bride. He is interested in his beloved mam, and is distressed to see her, along with the other mams on the island, weakening under the weight of their desperation to return to the sea. When the women start giving up, driven mad by this desire, Daniel decides to act. Along with his mam, and the other boys, he develops a plan to steal back the coats that will return the mams to seal form, and to take the children with them. The morning after their escape, the men of Rollrock wake to discover their wives and sons gone. They will not see their wives again, and those who do meet their sons again will not do so for some time.

The story is concluded by Lory Severner, a mainland girl who returns to the island generations after her family left, and Trudle Callisher, the mainland witch who became Misskaella's apprentice as a child. Upon burying Misskaella, Trudle uncovers a part of the secret that Misskaella had kept hidden. We learn that Misskaella stopped making seal women when the mams escaped, but in this final scene with Trudle, there is an uneasy sense of events repeating.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND



MARGO LANAGAN is an internationally acclaimed writer of novels and short stories. Her short-story collections have garnered many awards, nominations and shortlistings. *Black Juice* was a Michael L. Printz Honor Book and won two World Fantasy Awards and the Victorian Premier's Award for Young Adult Fiction. *Red Spikes* won the CBCA Book of the Year: Older Readers, was a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year, a *Horn Book* Fanfare title, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and longlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story

Award. Her novel *Tender Morsels* won the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel and was a Michael L. Printz Honor Book for Excellence in Young Adult Fiction. Margo lives in Sydney. She blogs at www.amongamidwhile.blogspot.com.

thestellaprize.com.au/2013/04/the-stella-interview-margo-lanagan/

THEMES

Identity
Ownership
Mother-son relationships
Love
Desire
Malice
Betrayal
Enchantment

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

As with many of the books in the Identity segment of these notes, *Sea Hearts* calls for a strong sense of **ethical understanding**, as the identities of many of these characters are shaped, and often decided, by the actions of others.

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ What hints are given early in the book about Misskaella's differences?
- ◆ Why do people leave her gifts?
- ◆ How does Misskaella's relationship with her family affect her decisions?
- ◆ What happens to Misskaella when she becomes a mother?
- ◆ Is she angry with the men or the women of Rollrock? If yes, why is she angry? How does she seek revenge?
- ◆ How does Misskaella describe bringing the women from the seals?
- ◆ What are the ethical issues around her actions?
- ◆ Why do the people on the mainland find the men of Rollrock disgusting?

- ◆ Why does Nance Winch go to see Misskaella? What do you read into the moment when Misskaella tells Nance to ‘give my regards to Mister Winch’ (p.126)?
- ◆ Is the men’s behaviour justified by their enchantment? How should they behave?
- ◆ How are the seal women portrayed in the book?
 - How are they seen by the men?
 - By their sons?
 - By Misskaella?
 - By the people from the mainland?
 (Give examples as evidence for each answer.)
- ◆ When Dominic leaves, what is Kitty afraid of?
- ◆ What is disrespectful about the actions of the boys when they put on their mother’s sealskins?
- ◆ What inspires Daniel to help his mother escape back to the sea? Why does he feel betrayed that she wants to leave?
- ◆ How do the men react once the seal women have escaped?
 - Are they sorry?
 - Who do they blame?
 - What are they upset to have lost?
- ◆ How does the author keep the narrative moving forward by giving different characters control of the narrative? What are the benefits of this shared narration?
- ◆ What is the fate of the female babies?
- ◆ One review describes the mams as ‘loving but not happy’. What do you think the reviewer means by this? Do you think it is correct?
- ◆ What is Misskaella’s secret? What does Trudle think it is? What are the main differences between Trudle and Misskaella?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. In *Sea Hearts*, Margo Lanagan has taken an old myth and turned it into her own story. Think of a myth or fairytale you know well and write a creative piece (up to 1500 words) making it your own story. Write a page outlining which parts you have

changed, which you have kept and why you made the decisions that you did regarding characters, time, setting etc.

(This could be a good comparison exercise with another fairytale retelling e.g. *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer.)

2. The seal women are portrayed as property and are written as having almost no personality or ability to rebel. Consider the effect this has on the way the other characters treat them, not only their husbands but other women and their children. Try to imagine that you are one of these women, suffering and without a voice.

Write a piece from their perspective (it can be a letter, diary entry etc. but should be in the first person). How has this changed or enhanced your reading of the text? Discuss as a group what other situations this understanding could be applied to.

What other examples can you think of where women are not able to give voice to their suffering? Choose one of these women and research their situation, then try to write a similar piece giving a voice to their suffering.

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Notes on *The Night Guest*

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2014 STELLA PRIZE



The feeling reminded her of something vital – not of youth, exactly, but of the urgency of youth – and she was reluctant to give it up.

Fiona McFarlane, *The Night Guest*

SYNOPSIS

Elderly widow Ruth is alone in her isolated New South Wales beach house. Her sensible husband, Harry, who walked every day for good health, is dead. Her two sons don't live close enough to visit regularly. Ruth is left with very little but the sense that her brain is somehow failing her, and a series of memories from a time when her life felt sharper, more vibrant.

One night Ruth is visited by a tiger. She can hear it creeping through the house, predatory, sweaty and foreign. The presence of this prowling guest turns her house into the jungle of her colonial youth. In the morning when she wakes, the tiger is gone, but Ruth is convinced that she can see evidence of its visit. In the wake of this unsettling incident, Ruth is surprised by a second guest, this time a woman, Frida, who sweeps into the house and announces that she has been sent by the government to care for Ruth. Ruth has the unsettling feeling that she has forgotten something, and though she means to check up on Frida, the moment to do so passes, and Ruth soon finds herself succumbing to Frida's new position in her house.

Frida's presence takes up a great deal of space, leaving little room for Ruth's own uncertain thoughts. Frida is a dominant character, and in her increasing uncertainty, Ruth starts to rely on her more and more. The reader, in turn, becomes uncertain of what is truth or lies, and of where the real danger exists. Ruth's sense of reality becomes increasingly blurred, and by the time she realises that Frida is taking

advantage of her, she is stuck in a relationship that she craves as much as she longs to escape it.

Ruth's reality is very much the focus of the book, and in this eerie house filled with unwanted guests, both real and imagined, she finds herself casting her mind back more and more to a romance from her childhood in Fiji. When she makes contact with Richard and he comes to stay, the romance and trust that grows quickly between them is a welcome relief, and there is hope that this may provide Ruth's escape. But this book is as much about Ruth's inability to be saved as it is about her need of saving. When George, Frida's partner in crime, double-crosses her and leaves her stranded with Ruth, there is a beautiful, belated, moment of genuine understanding between the two women.

Ruth, Frida and the tiger are inextricably linked, and as their lives are connected, so are their deaths. In a final act of manipulation – or perhaps real kindness – Frida chases the tiger around the house and kills it. When she later kills herself, these moments become joined in self-awareness and sorrow. Ruth is the last to die, leaving behind her cats as she calmly follows the tiger.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND



FIONA MCFARLANE was born in Sydney and has degrees in English from Sydney University and Cambridge University, as well as an MFA from the University of

Texas at Austin, where she was a Michener Fellow. Her work has been published in *Zoetrope: All-Story*, *Southerly*, *The Best Australian Stories* and the *New Yorker*, and she has received fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Phillips Exeter Academy, and the Australia Council for the Arts. *The Night Guest*, her debut novel, has sold into fifteen territories around the world. She lives in Sydney.

www.thestellaprizel.com.au/2014/04/the-stella-interview-fiona-mcfarlane/

THEMES

Identity
Loneliness
Dementia
Love
Family
Life/death
Colonialism
Memory
Isolation
Forgiveness
Manipulation
Fear
Language
Reality

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Alongside basic literacy skills and **critical and creative thinking**, *The Night Guest* poses many ethical questions to students asking them to consider their treatment of others, care of the elderly as well as the manipulation of someone in a trusting position. The study of this text therefore supports the general capability of **ethical understanding**, which encourages students to ‘appreciate and develop greater empathy for the rights and opinions of others’.

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ In what ways are *both* Ruth and Frida untrustworthy?
- ◆ What does the tiger symbolise?
- ◆ How do each of the characters find redemption – if they do at all?
- ◆ How does Fiona McFarlane manage to cross several genres in the book? What is the overall effect of this?
- ◆ Why doesn’t Ruth reach out to her sons or Ellen Gibson for help?
- ◆ Why is Ellen Gibson suspicious that something is wrong?
- ◆ In many interviews (links below), Fiona McFarlane talks about her inspiration for the tiger. What is it? How does she show this in the book?
- ◆ Is Frida a bad character? What desires is she driven by?
- ◆ How are the descriptions of Frida’s and Ruth’s respective physicality used to enhance the way we feel about them as characters?
- ◆ Does Ruth believe that the tiger is real?
- ◆ What are the attitudes of Ruth’s sons towards her? Why do you think this is? How does this impact on their treatment of her?
- ◆ What does Richard represent for Ruth?
- ◆ How are the descriptions of the physical landscape used to enhance the sense of isolation and danger, as well as the plausibility of the tiger?
- ◆ How are Ruth’s feelings towards her childhood different in the present and in the past?
- ◆ Why do you think Ruth has recently started turning to her childhood more and more for comfort?
- ◆ Why does Ruth enjoy swearing? Is there a pattern in the times that she feels like swearing?
- ◆ How does Frida manipulate Ruth?
- ◆ What are Ruth’s fears?
- ◆ What are Frida’s fears?
- ◆ What is colonialism? If you’re not sure, look it up and see what information you can find. What imagery in the book supports this theme?

- ◆ What similarities can you find between the idea of colonialism and Ruth's relationship with Frida? How does this relate to Ruth's childhood in Fiji?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Try writing a chapter from the book in the voice of one of the other characters (e.g. Frida, Ellen Gibson, Jeffrey or Richard). Really try to put yourself in the shoes of this character by writing down everything you know about them from the text and then creating a character description based on their actions. Discuss in pairs or groups how rewriting the scene has changed your interpretation of it and of the characters.
2. How does Frida's treatment of Ruth make you feel? How does it change? As a reader, how would you like Ruth to respond? Write a scene where Ruth responds differently. Read or perform these in class, and discuss the impact of the changes. How would Ruth reacting differently change the rest of the book?
3. At the end of each chapter write a short passage or some dot points with your observations on how Ruth and Frida have both changed. Consider things such as:
 - ◆ their physical descriptions
 - ◆ the language they use
 - ◆ their actions towards each other
 - ◆ who is given most of the dominant action in the scene

At the end of the book, share your observations with the rest of the class. Discuss where you felt differently from someone else. What note did you feel the relationship between the two women ultimately ended on?

Imagine a graph of their relationship – what is the shape of it? Does it go up and down fairly consistently, or does it always favour one character? What are the high points and low points?

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